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VINCENT M. BEVILACQUA

Adam Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres

A week before his death in 1790 Adam Smith's close friends Drs. Black and Hutton destroyed at his request sixteen volumes of manuscript of unknown content lest they be published posthumously in their unfinished form and impugn the reputation earned by the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and the *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Among the manuscripts, it appears, were the famous Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres first delivered in 1748-50 and reread in various forms at Glasgow University during Smith's tenure there as professor of logic and later of moral philosophy. With their destruction record of a pervasive influence in the development of eighteenth-century rhetorical and belletristic theory was lost for nearly two hundred years. Professor John M. Lothian's recent discovery of a manuscript copy of the rhetoric lectures taken as student notes in 1762-63 from Smith's course in moral philosophy,¹ however, now makes it possible to assess Smith's contribution to Scottish rhetorical theory.

I

Shortly after his graduation from Oxford in 1746, James Oswald, Robert Craigie and Lord Kames persuaded Adam Smith to deliver a course of public lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres, the first in Edinburgh. Among the Scots of his day Smith was pre-eminently qualified to deliver such a course of lectures. As a Snell Exhibitioner at Balliol College from 1740 to 1746, owing to the intellectual dissoluteness which then gripped Oxford, Smith turned from his preferred subjects of mathematics and natural philosophy to nearly private but systematic and thorough study of ancient and modern literature. Smith's Oxford studies proved substantial and were generously rewarded; for

¹ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. John M. Lothian (London, 1963). According to C. R. Fay, Smith had composed by 1783 several essays on criticism and belles lettres, some finished but the greater part not yet quite completed. *Adam Smith and the Scotland of His Day* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 1.

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the Edinburgh lectures of 1748-51 earned him £100 per year,² a wide reputation as a literator, and a professorship at Glasgow. Contrary to popular opinion, the lectures were not delivered at the University or under its auspices, but rather at one of the numerous clubs then flourishing in Edinburgh, probably the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, originally a medical society whose range of interest was extended in 1737 to science and literature.³ The rhetoric lectures of 1748-50 were read to an enthusiastic and notable audience including among other men of lettres Lord Kames and Hugh Blair, both of whom drew from Smith in their own subsequent works on rhetoric. The Edinburgh lectures of 1751 concerned jurisprudence, then a multifarious subject, which commanded Smith's attention for its connection to natural law, morals and economics. Moreover, as Scott has discovered, a number of Smith's early philosophical and economic theorizings also date to the Edinburgh period,⁴ as does his "Considerations on the First Formation of Languages" first published in the *Philological Miscellany* (1761). The precise content of the Edinburgh rhetoric lectures is not known. But an accurate indication of their nature is available from Smith's re-use of a version of them in related courses at Glasgow from 1751 to 1763. Indeed, Smith's conservative re-use of Edinburgh materials dates a number of his leading literary, political and economic principles to these apparently fertile years.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Scottish desire for self-improvement in literature and criticism had given considerable impetus to the study of belles lettres, creating a sympathetic climate of opinion to which Smith's fundamental approach to the rhetoric lectures and his Edinburgh success owed in part. English periodicals like the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, *Guardian* and *Rambler* had spread interest in belles lettres, and set a standard of enlightened taste in Scotland.⁵ Clubs of all sorts flourished. Smith himself was an inveterate clubman, the most notable of his literary memberships being the Select Society (1754) to which David Hume and he served as the committee on Criticism and Belles

² Letter from Hume to Smith, 8 June, 1758. *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1932), I, 280.

³ William Robert Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow, 1937), pp. 49-50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-385. Photographic facsimiles of one of the Edinburgh lectures.

⁵ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

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Lettres.⁶ To this society Alexander Gerard presented his prize-winning *Essay on Taste* (1759); and before a comparable gathering in Aberdeen—the Philosophical Society of Aberdeen, whose membership included Reid, Gregory and Beattie—Campbell presented nearly the whole of his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* beginning in 1757.

But it was in the University of Edinburgh that rhetoric and belles lettres was being given its widest and most scholarly encouragement. There, John Stevenson, professor of logic from 1730 to 1775, not satisfied merely with explaining the principles of logic and metaphysics, endeavoured "by prelections on the most esteemed classics, ancient and modern, to instil into the minds of his pupils, a relish for works of taste, and a love of elegant composition."⁷ His critical lectures included Aristotle, Longinus, Addison, Bossu, Dacier, Dryden and Pope; and were so firmly established as part of Edinburgh's renaissance that Stevenson objected to the establishment of a separate chair of rhetoric and belles lettres for Blair in 1762 as an encroachment on his own province.⁸

More the point, however, than Stevenson's academic rivalries is the impetus and support his lectures gave to the transition in Scottish philosophical-literary thought from formal logic and rhetoric considered separately and traditionally, to a psychological and belletristic view of logic and rhetoric considered—according to Thomas Reid—as an illustration of the various mental operations expressed by the several modifications of speech and writing.⁹ Underlying the revitalization of these related arts was the Scottish academic tradition of placing rhetoric and belles lettres in the province of the chair of logic. Traditionally, Scottish students were "drilled in logic and rhetoric by analysis of Latin and Greek authors, and by handling simple and compound

⁶ John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London, 1895), p. 116. Smith was a charter member. Other members included John Home, David Hume, Dr. Carlyle, Allan Ramsay, William Robertson, Andrew Stewart and Lord Kames. Other of Smith's societies and clubs included the Poker Club, the Glasgow Literary Society, Anderston Saturday Supper Club, Cochrane's Political Economy Club, the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, Royal Society of London, and Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which he was president of the Literary Branch.

⁷ "Account of the Public Life and Character of the Late Dr. Erskine, of Edinburgh," *Scots Magazine*, LXV (February, 1803), 76.

⁸ "Account of the Late Duke Gordon, M.A., including Anecdotes of the University of Edinburgh," *Scots Magazine*, LXIV (January, 1802), 22.

⁹ *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. William Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1852), p. 735. Speaking of George Jardine's approach after Stevenson and Smith.

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themes."¹⁰ In this vein, Stevenson introduced belles lettres into his lectures at Edinburgh, thereby influentially setting forth a stylistic view of rhetoric adopted by Smith at Edinburgh and Glasgow, and later by Blair and Kames. The rhetorical view of logic was, moreover, sustained by a number of the modern logic texts. Typical, for example, is Isaac Watts's *Logick* (1725), nearly one-fourth of which is devoted to the means of communicating effectively the materials discovered by the rules of logic.

It is in fact from his lectures on logic and moral philosophy that we learn the particulars of Smith's rhetoric. Whether they were the immediate cause of his election to Glasgow, Smith's Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric comprised a considerable portion of his course on logic, and appear to have been of a stylistic-belletristic nature in that he emphasized style as the most important of the five arts of traditional rhetoric. John Millar, one of Smith's students and later Professor of Civil Law at Glasgow, relates that having exhibited a general view of the powers of the mind, and having explained enough ancient logic to satisfy curiosity respecting the artificial method of reasoning, Smith "dedicated all the rest of his time to the delivery of a system of rhetoric and belles lettres."¹¹ In keeping with the prevailing view of logic and rhetoric, Smith held that "the best method of explaining and illustrating the various powers of the human mind . . . arises from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the principles of those literary compositions which contribute to persuasion or entertainment."¹²

¹⁰ James Coutts, *A History of the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1909), p. 109. David Murray confirms that rhetoric was included under logic at Glasgow. *Memories of the Old College of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1927), p. 21.

¹¹ Dugald Stewart, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects by the late Adam Smith . . . to which is prefixed An Account of the Life and Writings of the Author* (Basil, 1799), p. X. Quoting Millar. Edwin Cannan's table of parallel passages between the manuscript he discovered in the form of student notes taken in 1763 (*Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms* [Oxford, 1896], pp. xxxv-xxxix.) and the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) evidences Smith's conservative re-use of lecture materials; as does W. R. Scott's discovery of an early draft of the *Wealth of Nations* dating to Edinburgh.

¹² Stewart, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p. X. This view George Jardine maintained when he became professor of logic at Glasgow in 1774. He did so by presenting the elements of the mind and the intellectual powers, the theory of language as illustrative of human thought, the principles of taste and criticism, and the means of improving the powers of communication by speech and writing, as exhibited in the best models of ancient and modern composition. George Jardine, *Outlines of Philosophical Education* (Glasgow, 1818), p. v.

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The illness and death of Thomas Craigie in 1751 burdened Smith for a session with the duties of two academic chairs—logic and moral philosophy—necessitating still further use of previously prepared materials. And after his accession to the chair of moral philosophy, Smith continued to employ relevant Edinburgh lectures, primarily those on jurisprudence but including some also on rhetoric. According to Millar, the chair of moral philosophy was not as suited to rhetoric lectures as that of logic;¹³ yet there is evidence that Smith continued to read such lectures throughout his tenure in moral philosophy. It was during the professorship in moral philosophy that Boswell attended Smith's lectures on belles lettres in 1759; and it was from student notes of Smith's last course in moral philosophy in 1762-63 that Lothian got his recently published manuscript of the lectures on rhetoric.

Although they were never published in his own day, Smith's rhetoric lectures were widely circulated and had the effect of a book. Hugh Blair, as he guardedly acknowledges, had the loan of Smith's lectures for aid in the composition of his own course in rhetoric and belles lettres beginning in 1759. Thomas Reid, too, on succeeding Smith in moral philosophy, sought his predecessor's prelections "whether in morals, jurisprudence, politics, or rhetoric."¹⁴ Like Blair who was forced by threat of surreptitious publication to publish from his own hand, Smith was compelled by wide and liberal borrowing of his economic and literary views to lay exclusive claim to them. This he did in the famous "Lecture of 1755" delivered before Cochrane's Political Economy Club—the leading commercial club in Glasgow—in which he set forth "a pretty long enumeration . . . of certain leading principles, both political and literary, to which he was anxious to establish his exclusive right."¹⁵ The lecture of 1755 has been of some value to students of economics in establishing the priority of Smith's economic views to those of the French Physiocrats; and it indicates to

¹³ Smith's course of lectures on moral philosophy was divided into four parts: Natural Theology, Ethics, Justice, and Politics. Stewart, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, pp. XI-XII. Where the rhetoric lectures were incorporated is not recorded.

¹⁴ A. C. Fraser, *Thomas Reid* (Edinburgh, 1898), p. 76. From Reid's inaugural lecture, October 10, 1764.

¹⁵ Stewart, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p. XCVIII. There is no evidence that Smith objected to Blair's use of his rhetoric lectures. In a letter to Smith, Edinburgh, 3 April, 1776, Blair praised highly Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. W. R. Scott, "A Manuscript Criticism of *The Wealth of Nations*," *Economic History*, III (February, 1938), 51-53.

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students of rhetoric the marked constancy of Smith's rhetorical views between Edinburgh and Glasgow. According to Stewart, who at the time of his writing claims to have had a manuscript of the lecture in hand, Smith stated that the majority of the literary and economic views enumerated in the lecture of 1755 were ones which he held and lectured on without any considerable variation since Edinburgh.¹⁶ These views, unfortunately, Stewart does not enumerate. If they are, as evidence indicates, ones stated in Smith's later works and rhetoric lectures, then the exclusive principles of 1755 originated in common eighteenth-century assumptions reinterpreted by Smith in terms of his own frame of reference.

II

After Shaftesbury, as Smith's moral and rhetorical writings reveal, the tenor of eighteenth-century ethics became increasingly aesthetic, deriving its basis not from an appeal to pure reason but to emotion and imagination. Men no sooner perceive human actions and affection, Shaftesbury wrote, than they judge them fair and shapely, or foul and deformed.¹⁷ In his terms, the "moral beauty" of a just act, like the aesthetic beauty of a well executed piece of art, is perceived originally and immediately by all men. These analogical beauties subsequent writers in ethics and aesthetics continued to confound and conjoin owing (in addition to the influence of Shaftesbury) to their common source of perception in a so-called moral-aesthetic sense or preconception; to the common elements of immediate and original perception, custom, fitness and utility which they shared; and to the metaphor "moral beauty" which expressed their connection. Hutcheson, Hume

¹⁶ Stewart, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p. C. Smith refers particularly to the jurisprudence lectures of 1751. Among his other activities in 1755, Smith contributed to the early *Edinburgh Review*, founded by Alexander Wedderburn who attended his Edinburgh rhetoric lectures. The preface to the first number (1755) was the joint work of Hume, Blair and Smith. In addition, Smith contributed a review of Johnson's *Dictionary*, which he found an extraordinary work of single authorship, but not sufficiently grammatical. Adam Smith, "A Dictionary of the English Language," *Edinburgh Review* (January, 1755). In the *Edinburgh Review*, 2nd edition (1818), pp. 61-73. Smith's reputation before the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) was clearly a literary one.

¹⁷ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London, 1727), II, 414-415.

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and Kames reflect this view.¹⁸ And in Smith too the aesthetic view of ethics prevails together with the classical doctrine of propriety which became a leading precept in his ethical-aesthetic theory. Smith devotes a major portion of the *Moral Sentiments*, for example, to the psychological elements of propriety, and their effect on ethical judgments. Similarly, he considers the purely aesthetic implications of propriety, as well as the ethical and aesthetic effect of such related elements of propriety as custom, utility and fashion. He speaks of ethical judgments in aesthetic terms, and he, like his contemporaries, joins the related beauties.¹⁹

Though their particular views varied, eighteenth-century philosophers generally accepted the affections and emotions common to human nature as the origin and ultimate sanction of moral and aesthetic beauty. Rejecting the doctrine of innate ideas on the one hand and the excesses of abstract reason on the other, Shaftesbury founded the perception of the dual beauties on connatural moral-aesthetic preconceptions.²⁰ Hutcheson, carrying the view a step further, based such perception on moral and aesthetic senses somewhat analogous to the external senses. Hume, partially rejecting the views of his predecessors, rested it on a capacity to agreeable and disagreeable impressions, sympathy and utility. And Smith founded the perception of moral-aesthetic beauty on a bit of them all. Smith was closely acquainted with Hutcheson's reinterpretation of Shaftesbury from his student days at Glasgow where Hutcheson was his professor of moral philosophy. Yet on the grounds that they were superfluous, not supported by empirical

¹⁸ Hutcheson got the connection of beauty and virtue from Shaftesbury: see *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1725). James Bonar holds that Hume's view of ethics may be paralleled with his view of aesthetics (*Moral Sense* [London, 1930], p. 160). See also Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1958), p. 576. Kames wrote in the *Elements of Criticism* ([Edinburgh, 1762], I, 6) that "A taste in the fine arts goes hand in hand with the moral sense, to which indeed it is nearly allied. . . ."

¹⁹ Smith speaks, for example, "Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon the characters and actions of men; and how far the perception of this beauty may be regarded as one of the original principles of approbation." *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Dublin, 1777), p. 250.

²⁰ After Locke, of course, Shaftesbury preferred the word "connatural" to "innate," wishing only to indicate that such "propensities" or "preconceptions" — as he carefully termed what later became "senses" — were naturally part of the constitution of men, not that they were there before or at birth.

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evidence, and contradictory to the observable economy of nature,²¹ Smith rejected Hutcheson's connate senses, offering in their place a single principle of human nature which underlies the perception of both aesthetic and moral beauty. That principle was sympathy, or as Smith defined it "fellow feeling with any passion whatever," an imaginary exchange of places with our fellow man resulting in a close correspondence or communication of human affections. In his ethical theory Smith carried sympathy to its logical conclusion with the theory of the "disinterested spectator," who by partaking of the affections of those he judges renders an ethical judgment on that basis. And like Hume from whom he apparently drew the concept of sympathy, Smith also recognized the considerable role of this "original principle of man's nature" in aesthetic as well as moral judgments.²² Speaking of the sense of propriety which is the immediate cause and sanction of such judgments, Smith observed that "the man whose *sympathy* keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness [propriety] of my sorrow. He who admires the same poem, or the same picture, and admires them exactly as I do, must surely allow the justness of my admiration. He who laughs at the same joke, and laughs along with me, cannot well deny the propriety of my laughter."²³ In further agreement with Hume, Smith recognized that in addition to sympathy ancillary elements of propriety are influential in moral and aesthetic judgments. The appearance of utility, he acknowledges, bestows beauty on works of art and human actions. Likewise, custom has considerable influence in moral-aesthetic opinions, particularly aesthetic opinions which depending on delicate principles of the imagination are more susceptible to prevailing taste than are moral opinions which are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature.²⁴ These additional principles, however, merely heighten the

²¹ Nature, Smith observes, acts regarding the perception of moral approbation "as in all other cases, with the strictest economy, and produces a multitude of effects from one and the same cause; and sympathy, a power which has always been taken notice of . . . is . . . sufficient to account for all the effects ascribed to this peculiar faculty." *Moral Sentiments*, p. 357.

²² Hume notes, "Thus it appears, *that* sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature, *that* it has a great influence on our taste of beauty, and *that* it produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues." *Treatise*, pp. 577-578.

²³ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, p. 15. My italics. Man's sense of propriety rises from what Smith calls a "direct sympathy with the affections and motives of the person who acts. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-290.

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natural sense of such beauties, and are not their original cause. Smith reserves that distinction for sympathy alone.

By proposing a single original principle of human nature as the wellspring of moral-aesthetic judgments, Smith earned a measure of originality and distinction for his otherwise eclectic views. Unlike Hutcheson, Gerard, Kames and Reid, Smith offered only "sympathy" in place of the generally held proliferation of distinct senses that numbered almost as many psychological causes as moral and aesthetic effects.²⁵ But in keeping with the majority of his contemporaries, Hume of course excepted, Smith's belief in irreducible principles of human nature divinely implanted for good and wise purposes caused him to stop short in his investigation of such principles and to substitute as efficient causes original irreducible "facts of human nature" in place of thoroughly analytic investigation.²⁶ Typically, Smith does not investigate and explain the epistemology of sympathy, the central tenet of his diverse writings, but rather assumes it to be an original principle of human nature. This because like his close friend and mentor Kames, Smith's epistemology straddled both rationalism and empiricism, and was reasoned from the assumption that man and the universe are governed by Natural Law. Smith maintains with the rationalists that there are propensities of the mind prior to experience, but rejects any such propensities which are beyond observation. He holds with the empiricists (and on this basis rejects Hutcheson's moral sense) that the nature of the mind can be determined only by observation, but holds in opposition connatural propensities (like sympathy) implanted exclusive of experience.

His mode of inquiry is, however, professedly nonmetaphysical in the British empirical tradition. Inquiring into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations, for example, Smith rejected the "cobweb science of metaphysics" and attempted to state valid economic generalizations based on observable natural phenomena. Having ruled out the possibility of a priori knowledge, Smith drew the fundamental premises of ethics, economics and aesthetics from an induction of sense data. Ethical, economic and aesthetic systems, he believed, should be founded

²⁵ Kames is notorious in this respect, proposing among others, distinct senses of Beauty, Grandeur, Sublimity, Novelty, Resemblance, Congruity, Variety and Propriety. Similarly, in his *Essay on Taste* (Edinburgh, 1759), Gerard speaks of the senses of Novelty, Grandeur, Sublimity, Beauty, Harmony, Ridicule and Virtue.

²⁶ Walter J. Hipple, *The Beautiful, The Sublime, and The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, 1957), p. 100.

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on one or more general premises (sympathy, self-interest) from which known natural phenomena could be deduced or explained, though the premises themselves could only be established by prior induction. His ideal, of course, was Newton's "system of the world" which explained the entire universe with sublime simplicity and economy in terms of a single major premise based on induction, gravitation.²⁷

Yet in the eighteenth century the classical concept of Natural Law, commonly accepted as inherently rational or divinely ordained, prevailed as a powerful crosscurrent to Newtonian method, and had a paradoxical effect on Smith and other writers attenuating their empiricism with the notion of divine design and final cause.²⁸ It is in fact his faith in the divinely ordained and immutable order of physical and human nature that causes Smith to embrace, at the expense of true analysis, "propensities or principles of human nature of which no further account can be given." By incorporating into his philosophical system final causes which transcend experience, Smith retreated from total empiricism to a kind of limited empiricism in which unobservable as well as observable phenomena play a part.

Although the foregoing views may appear strange and fanciful to the modern reader with a two-hundred year scientific and philosophic advantage on Smith, they are no less assumptions, opinions and methods which sustained economic, political and literary views so popular in their own day that Smith had to lay formal claim to them.

²⁷ Henry J. Bittermann, "Adam Smith's Empiricism and the Law of Nature," *The Journal of Political Economy*, XLVIII (February-December, 1940), 500. Contrasting Aristotelian and Newtonian method Smith notes that "in the manner of Sir Isaac Newton, we may lay down certain principles, primary or proved, in the beginning, from whence we account for the several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain. This latter, which we may call the Newtonian method, is undoubtedly the most philosophical, and in every science, whether of Morals or Natural Philosophy, etc., is vastly more ingenious . . . than the other. It gives us a pleasure to see the phenomena which we reckoned the most unaccountable, all deduced from some principle (commonly, a well-known one) and all united in one chain. . . ." *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 140.

²⁸ In Smith's day the concept of Natural Law included on the one hand the immutable phenomena of nature, the Newtonian laws of motion, the physical universe and man's original mental endowments; and on the other the Ciceronian-Roman notion of *ius naturale* promulgated in the eighteenth century in the works of Locke, Montesquieu and Voltaire. But through natural theology the law of nature was closely identified with the law of God, and widely accepted as divinely ordained by the "Author of Nature" for good and wise final causes. See W. R. Scott, "Adam Smith," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, X (1921-23), 437-439.

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More important still, they are presuppositions which the modern reader of the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* must share with Smith if he is to appreciate fully Smith's rhetorical theory.

III

The distinctive feature of Adam Smith's lectures on rhetoric is his application of the concept of propriety to questions of style and belles lettres. In Smith, however, this traditional stylistic precept is not drawn from ancient rhetorical theory where it is conspicuous, but rather from propriety in morals and aesthetics. For although he was thoroughly acquainted with classical theory and the concept of rhetorical propriety, Smith repudiated the greater portion of ancient rhetoric, dubbing its literature "a very silly set of books and not at all instructive."²⁹ Unlike reactionary writers in rhetoric such as John Ward and John Lawson, Smith would not accept solely on the basis of their antiquity traditional rhetorical principles which were not founded on observable facts of human nature. To Smith, the labored systems and endless distinctions of ancient rhetoric compared unfavorably with a theory of rhetoric based on the natural powers and propensities of the human mind. For this reason, while he admired and extolled the ancient historians Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus; the rhetoricians Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Longinus and Dionysius; and the orators of the Attic Canon and Cicero, Smith did not merely underwrite ancient rhetorical dicta with contemporary philosophical theory. On the contrary, assuming ancient and modern literature and public address to be the natural expression of human thoughts and sentiments, Smith explained the bases of such expression in terms of the general premises of human nature (sympathy, propriety) from which such natural phenomena could be deduced.

Smith did, nonetheless, base his understanding of the scope of rhetoric on what he erroneously thought was the predominate ancient view of the art. "Cicero, Quintilian, and all the best authors who treat of Rhetorical Composition," he believed, "treat of the invention of arguments, or topics, and the composition or arrangement of them, as very slight matters and of no great difficulty, and never seem to be in earnest unless when they give us directions concerning the ornaments

²⁹ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 23. Smith refers to the many ancient and modern systems of figurative rhetoric. From remarks in the *Moral Sentiments* (pp. 265-267) it is evident that he was closely acquainted with the classical notion of rhetorical propriety.

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of language and expression. . . ."³⁰ The extent of Smith's misinterpretation of classical rhetoric is evident to modern students of rhetoric, as the ancient rhetoricians were surely equally concerned with style and substance. And in accord with his misinterpretation, Smith proposed not a traditional theory of rhetoric, which included the classical arts of invention, arrangement, style and delivery, but a stylistic-belletristic one. Indeed, in Smith's lectures style alone is the pressing concern of rhetoric and the area of greatest artistic latitude.³¹ His view is belletristic in that he extended the scope of rhetoric to literature and literary criticism, treating historical, didactic and rhetorical composition as well as forensic, epideictic and deliberative public address. Smith may at first appear to entertain a concept of rhetoric patterned after Peter Ramus, the medieval reformer of the liberal arts, who maintained that the invention and arrangement of subject matter is the concern of logic, that the sole concern of rhetoric is style and delivery. Yet the entire range of Smith's writing provides no evidence that he believed invention and arrangement to be the province of logic not rhetoric. Rather, his concern for the arguments and arrangement peculiar to the three types of rhetoric indicates that he recognized fully the substantive aspect of rhetorical composition, but chose to focus his attention on the stylistic aspect.

According to the 1762-63 version of the lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres discovered by Lothian, Smith delivered 29 lectures on the elements of composition, the origin and progress of language, figures of speech, the characteristics of style, and the species of composition between November 19, 1762 and February 18, 1763. If contemporary accounts are accurate, the transition from traditional to stylistic-belletristic rhetoric demonstrated in these and prior lectures had a pronounced effect on Scottish literary taste and ensuing rhetorical theory, particularly that of Kames and Blair. Curiously enough, although he was a noted philosopher in his own day, and had by 1759 published his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's lectures are not set in a particularly philosophical framework. Unlike Kames who develops with

³⁰ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 142. Smith adds, "The expression and style is what requires most skill, and is alone capable of any particular directions." *Ibid.*

³¹ Smith dismisses the refined topoi of forensic rhetoric with the belittling observation that "the rhetoricians divide all these topics into many orders and classes. (These will be found in Quintilian by those who incline to read them. For my part I'll be at no further trouble about them at present.)" *Ibid.*, p. 167.

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exhausting detail the epistemological and aesthetic bases of his rhetoric, Smith's approach is more historical and literary than epistemological and psychological. Where Kames is complex and subtle, Smith is simple and direct.³² He is less a philosopher lecturing on rhetoric than a literator lecturing on polite literature. In the lectures on rhetoric, philosophic assumptions generally remain presupposed, emerging only occasionally as incidental to the practical matter of style at hand, not as the center of attention.

Clearly, however, the leading precept as well as the distinguishing feature of Smith's stylistic theory of rhetoric is propriety of expression. The rhetorical propriety Smith recommends in the lectures on belles lettres is, moreover, substantially the same with the moral-aesthetic propriety of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as they share common origins and elements, and render similar judgments regarding beauty. What Smith says about perfection (propriety) of style thus bears considerable resemblance to his remarks on propriety of action and affection. That "perfection of style consists in express[ing] in the most concise, proper, and precise manner the thought of the author, and . . . in the manner which best conveys the sentiment, passion, or affection with which it affects . . . him, and which he designs to communicate to his reader."³³ This, Smith acknowledges, is no more than common sense. "But," he notes, "if you will attend to it, all the rules of criticism and morality, when traced to their foundation, turn out to be some principles of common sense which every one assents to. . . ."³⁴ Because he wrote in a simple style fitted to his character, Dean Swift is in Smith's opinion the most proper and precise of all the English writers, remarkable for the propriety and beauty of his expression. Swift, that is, acted agreeably to that rule which is equally applicable to conversation and behavior as to writing:

For what is it that makes a man agreeable company? Is it not, when his sentiments appear to be agreeably expressed, when the passion or affection is properly conveyed, and when their [sic] thoughts are so agreeable and natural that we find ourselves inclined to give our assent to them?

In like manner what is it that is agreeable in style? It is when

³² *Ibid.*, p. xix.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 51. See Smith, *Moral Sentiments* (pp. 14-19) on propriety of action and affection.

³⁴ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 51.

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all the thoughts are justly and properly expressed in such a manner as shews the passion they affected the author with, and so that all seemed natural and easy. He never seems to act out of character, but speaks in a manner not only suitable to the subject, but to the character he naturally inclines to.³⁵

In addition to sharing a common excellence with moral-aesthetic propriety, rhetorical or stylistic propriety shares sympathy as its common basis in human nature. Regarding sympathy, Smith observes that "when the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain, and clever manner, and the passion or affection he is poss[ess]ed of and intends, *by sympathy*, to communicate to his hearer, is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it."³⁶ And like moral-aesthetic propriety, rhetorical propriety is also affected by the ancillary element of custom in addition to sympathy. "It is the custom of the people," Smith adds, "that forms what we call propriety, and the custom of the better sort from whence the rules of purity of style are to be drawn."³⁷

Because the rules of style are ultimately founded on common principles of human nature, Smith does not explain the philosophical or epistemological origins of stylistic propriety, but assumes his audience will recognize the common eighteenth-century premises on which it is based. Apparently because the origins and elements of rhetorical propriety are analogous to moral-aesthetic propriety, and further because beauty of style is a mode of aesthetic beauty and discerned by the same propensity of human nature, to Smith's way of thinking rhetorical propriety is recognized immediately and connaturally by all men owing to the action of the natural sense of propriety, its principal agent sympathy, and its ancillary agent custom. Despite their differing views of the psychological bases of propriety, Kames's use of this same standard as the touchstone of stylistic judgments more than coincidentally parallels Smith's use of it. Following Hutcheson and in contrast to Smith, Kames founded the perception of propriety on a divinely implanted distinct sense, and did not emphasize the role of sympathy in such perceptions. Yet in the *Elements of Criticism* propriety is conspicuous as the standard by which the stylistic excellences

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23. Smith's italics.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Among eighteenth-century grammarians, Campbell and Priestley were also proponents of the doctrine of usage.

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of language of passion, beauty of language and figures of speech are judged.

Regarding questions of style, Smith augments his empirical method of inquiry with an historical-conjectural method of investigation, attempting thereby to determine the origin and propriety of a particular style by what is known of its author's character and his social context.³⁸ It is quite possible, of course, as Lothian suggests,³⁹ that in his concern for character analysis Smith may have been using materials he had prepared for other lectures, perhaps those on moral philosophy. Nonetheless, in a typical conjectural analysis, Smith proposes that Shaftesbury's style is suited to the same character that led him to his system of philosophy. His weak body, preventing violence of passion, did not incline him to any great height of temper. His style, therefore, was not naturally more of one sort than another. Since he was not naturally led by distinct character to a particular style, he formed a model or ideal of perfection which he always kept in view. "Polite dignity is the character he aimed at, and as this seems to be best supported by a grand and pompous diction, that was the style he made choice of. This he carried so far that when the subject was far from being grand, his style is as pompous as in the most sublime subjects."⁴⁰ This concern for the character of men and their society prevails throughout the lectures on rhetoric; accordingly, Smith's rhetorical inquiries often lead him more to character analysis than philosophical analysis.

Smith devotes the majority of his lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres to an examination of three species of composition. "Every discourse," he says, "proposes either barely to relate some fact or to prove some proposition. The first is the kind of discourse called a narrative one; the latter is the foundation of two sorts of discourses,

³⁸ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 48. The conjectural method is conspicuous throughout the lectures on rhetoric. In the lecture on the "Origin and Progress of Language" (one substantially the same with the essay appended to the third (1767) edition of the *Moral Sentiments*) he reasons that from the propensity of human nature to give one object the name of another which resembles it, words which originally signified single objects (a particular "cave") came to be special names to certain classes of things ("caves") improving the language and communication. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32n.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Smith believes that "when all other circumstances are alike, the character of the author must make the style different." *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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the didactic and the rhetorical."⁴¹ The narrative style Smith considers with regard to the general rules for the description of objects, particular rules for the description of different sorts of objects, and rules on the proper manner by describing more complex objects (the characters, actions and conduct of men). Didactic and oratorical composition, he says, have two parts: "the proposition which we lay down, and the proof which is brought to confirm this, whether this proof be a strict one, applied to our reason and sound judgment, or one adapted to affect our passions and by that means persuade us at any time."⁴² Deferring his consideration of didactic and oratorical composition, Smith proceeds immediately to historical composition (a form of the narrative) which he discusses from five points of view: the end of historical composition, the means to that end, the materials of history, the arrangement of those materials, their expression or style, and those who have excelled in it. Conspicuous in this scheme are three of the five traditional canons of rhetoric. But Smith's is not a traditional view. The comparison which Smith makes between historical and rhetorical composition indicates that his view is pejorative with regard to the rhetorical and propitious with regard to the historical. Rhetorical composition, he says, "endeavors by all means to persuade us, and for this purpose it magnifies all the arguments on the one side, and diminishes or conceals those . . . on the side contrary. . . ."⁴³ When the aim is to present the case in its clearest light and to give every argument its due force, "and by this means persuade us no farther than our unbiassed judgment is convinced, this is not to make use of the rhetorical style."⁴⁴ Among eighteenth-century rhetoricians, the similar opinion that history informs the judgment whereas rhetoric arouses the passions and persuades was held by Joseph Priestley.⁴⁵

Because the rules of didactic writing are, according to Smith, very obvious, he passes over them and proceeds immediately to the rhetorical style. This species of belles lettres he divides after the ancients into the demonstrative, the deliberative and the judicial, considering their ends, means, materials, arrangement and those who excelled in them.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Joseph Priestley, *Lectures on History and General Policy* (London, 1793), II, 1-2.

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Smith's remarks in the nine lectures on rhetorical composition allow no doubt that he was thoroughly acquainted with the entire body of ancient rhetoric and public address. Yet he does not speak of invention, arrangement and style like a classical rhetorician offering the available means of persuasion, but rather as a literator searching out the essential principles of still another species of belles lettres. His aim is more to explain what is characteristic of rhetorical composition and why, than to prescribe how it is to be used. This is clearly the case with Smith's discussion of the differences between the styles of Demosthenes and Cicero. Predictably, Smith conjectures regarding differences in style in terms of the character of the man and his society. Demosthenes's austere, rigid, stoic disposition, and the democratic society in which he lived caused him to speak in the simple, unaffected plain style suited to his peers. In contrast, the vain, ostentatious, spirited Cicero, living in noble Rome, spoke in the florid, figurative grand style suitable to a patrician called upon to address his inferiors.⁴⁶ The modern student of public address will, perhaps, question Smith's oversimplification of the factors affecting the two great stylists of antiquity, but he cannot doubt that the conjectural method and concern for character are the leading precepts of his particular vein of rhetorical criticism.

The same is true of Smith's account of the differences between ancient and modern judicial eloquence. If, Smith believes, ancient eloquence was more florid and grand than the comparatively plain and perspicuous modern style, the difference resides primarily in the difference between the character of Greeks, Romans and Englishmen, and in the difference between ancient Greece and Rome and eighteenth-century England. Where his friend Hume was at a loss as to the cause of the decline of eloquence in latter ages, Smith observes that "this and other differences [in eloquence] must necessarily arise from the nature of the country [England] and the particular turn of the people [calm composed, unpassionate]."⁴⁷ It would be, in Smith's terms, improper to the character of the country and the people to speak in eighteenth-century England as one would in ancient Greece or Rome.

While Smith worked within the traditional rhetorical framework

⁴⁶ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, pp. 152-153. Smith concludes that the "differences in the style of these orators [Cicero and Demosthenes] may probably arise from the different condition of the countries in which they lived. The tempers of the men would no doubt also have had their effects." *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190. See also David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (London, 1770), I, 115-126.

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in his criticism of public address, as the title of his lectures indicates he was concerned with belles lettres as well as rhetoric. His belief that speech and writing are natural expressions of common mental operations extended his understanding of the subject beyond the confines of traditional rhetoric to the elements, principles and criticism of all forms of literature. Since Smith believed style to be the primary concern of the critic, his literary judgments are not in terms of the functional and substantive, but rather the aesthetic and stylistic. Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres are, therefore, more belletristic, aesthetic and critical than rhetorical, practical and concerned with persuasion. Like Kames, Smith recognized that universal principles of human nature, morals and aesthetics underlie both rhetorical and belletristic composition and criticism. From Addison and Longinus he was familiar with the stock eighteenth-century elements of criticism commonly applied to both rhetoric and belles lettres: novelty, grandeur, sublimity, beauty and wonder.⁴⁸ He employed the aesthetic-stylistic standard of propriety and the conjectural method of inquiry with equal facility in criticism of writing and speaking. Indeed, to Smith the beauties of all types of style and composition are perceived immediately and originally in accord with man's natural inclination to propriety. Accessory to any such judgment, of course, is consideration of the character of the author, his society and the thoughts and sentiments he expresses. Little wonder then in light of these methods and assumptions that Smith did not limit his lectures on rhetoric solely to the art of persuasion.

If, as Lothian believes, the manuscript of 1763 is an expanded version of the original Edinburgh lectures, Smith's broad philosophical and literary approach to rhetoric and belles lettres was certainly widely circulated in word and print during the fifteen-year span in which the lectures were delivered. Even a conservative estimate of his influence would allow that with Stevenson, Smith gave considerable impetus to the transition in Scottish literary thought from rhetoric taken as a narrow art of persuasive discourse to rhetoric and belles lettres broadly taken as the forms of writing and speaking natural to man — the rhetorical, poetical, didactic, narrative, historical, and ecclesiastical. Only in his lack of emphasis on the principles of taste was Smith out of step with contemporaries like Gerard, Kames and Blair. This is not to say

⁴⁸ Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, p. 60. Smith was acquainted with Addison's essay on the *Pleasures of the Imagination*. *Ibid.*, p. 49. In typical eighteenth-century fashion Smith announces "there are two sorts of objects that excite our admiration, viz., when an object is grand, or when it is beautiful. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 44.

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that Smith was unconcerned with the problem of taste, only that such interest is not explicitly demonstrated in the rhetoric lectures or recorded in contemporary commentary on them.

Prior to the discovery of Smith's lectures, the rhetoric of belles lettres was most popularly espoused in Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. That Scottish literators like Smith, Kames and Blair should share common literary notions is not remarkable. What is remarkable is that on a number of points young Smith appears to have been the teacher and Blair and Kames the students. To what degree this is the case is problematic. Kames does not acknowledge a debt to Smith. But Kames was not particularly scrupulous in this respect, and his opinions on rhetoric and belles lettres do reveal a concern for stylistic propriety strikingly parallel with Smith's, indicating a rather likely line of influence. Blair, on the other hand, acknowledges that he had the loan of Smith's lectures for aid in the composition of his own lectures on rhetoric which he first delivered in 1759 and published in 1783.⁴⁹ It has been suggested that Smith's lectures are practically reproduced in Blair's. A comparison of the newly available Smith lectures with the Blair lectures does not, however, warrant this conclusion. The two sets of lectures are comparable in mood and subject only, not scope and method. Blair's range of subjects is far wider than Smith's; and the conjectural method and character analysis which prevails in Smith is far less pronounced in Blair. A comparison of lectures does, nonetheless, suggest that Blair's debt to Smith — as to Kames, Gerard and others — is considerable; that Blair extended and amplified rhetorical topics originally inaugurated by Smith. More important still, and so broad a debt as possibly to be overlooked, one can hardly doubt that the tenor and complexion of Blair's lectures would not have been different — perhaps significantly — had he not had the advantage of Smith's Edinburgh lectures and the loan of his notes. In rhetoric and belles lettres, as in economics and ethics, Smith appears to have been an innovator of some note and influence in his own day.

⁴⁹ *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London, 1838), p. 238n. Blair states: "On this head, of the General Characters of Style, particularly the plain and the simple, and the characters of those English authors who are classed under them, in this [XVIII] and the following lecture, several ideas have been taken from a manuscript Treatise on Rhetoric, part of which was shown to me, many years ago, by the learned and ingenious author, Dr. Adam Smith; and which, it is hoped, will be given by him to the public."

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IV

Adam Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres are, then, more a reflection of prevailing eighteenth-century philosophical and literary opinion than classical rhetorical theory. Approaching his subject from the ethical-aesthetic tradition of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and from the empirical-inductive tradition of Newton, Locke and Hume, Smith drew the general premises of rhetoric and belles lettres from widely accepted principles of human nature. As a result, although he was thoroughly acquainted with traditional rhetorical theory, he rejected its artificial systems of topoi and tropes in favor of the many forms of composition and literature which he believed to be varied modifications of the natural powers of the human mind. These forms of the belles lettres Smith analyzed in terms of an original propensity of human nature — propriety, and its agents sympathy and custom. He thereby accounted for a variety of stylistic excellences in terms of a single general principle verified by the common sense of man. By applying the experimental method of reasoning (and the conjectural method of inquiry) to questions of belles lettres, Smith discovered principles of human nature that broadened the scope of traditional rhetoric to include all the forms of speech and writing of which the mind is capable, and thus gave considerable impetus to the Scottish belles lettres movement anticipating in mood and precept the works of Kames and Blair.

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